

The Lively Experiment
Exodus 3:1-12
Galatians 5:1, 13-15
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When the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland convenes in Edinburgh - the Queen or her representative is there to participate in a very stately and impressive opening processional. It is one of the major events in the life of the nation and given very wide coverage in the press.

The meeting of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church USA is slightly more modest - but it is an event bursting with history and tradition. The Presbyterians organized themselves into a national church at the same time the new nation was writing its Constitution. The first Assembly was held in Philadelphia in 1789, not far from where the writers of the Constitution were working. John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, was elected the first Moderator. The General Assembly is, therefore, one of the oldest deliberative bodies in our culture.

It convened for the 189th time two weeks ago in Philadelphia. The Assembly opens traditionally with a Communion Service for the Commissioners and guests, presided over by the retiring Moderator. The Processional with which the service began came down the center aisle of Philadelphia's massive Civic Arena to the glorious refrain of "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee": the banners of the Church and its Confessions of Faith were first; next came the participants in the service: Thelma Adair - retiring Moderator, William Thompson, Stated Clerk - and a number of Clergy and Elders. Then came a large and slightly disorganized group of lay people: old, young, families, children, even an infant or two. There was no explanatory note in the bulletin and the congregation of several thousand was noticeably surprised and somewhat perplexed by this unusual gesture. This group, which numbered about sixty, took seats facing the congregation.

In her address, Mrs. Adair, the second woman - and first black woman to be elected to the highest office in our Church, talked about her roots and it suddenly became apparent that what she had done was provide the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church and any part of the whole world interested in observing, a visual symbol of the Gospel of Freedom. The people in the parade were her family - brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, nephews, nieces and grandchildren. They had several things in common besides their relationship with the Moderator. They had all come from the roots of slavery a little more than a century ago. And they had all come by way of the church - the Presbyterian Church. Mrs. Adair explained that after the Civil War the Presbyterians had led the way in establishing what were known as "Freedman's" schools in the south for former slaves. She and her family are who they are today because their ancestors attended institutions such as Barber Scotia and Mary Holmes Colleges. It was an impressive and very moving demonstration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Two days later, time allowed us a leisurely stroll through the old, restored section of the city where the momentous events took place 201 years ago. We looked again at the neat row houses, narrow streets, the shops and churches where freedom was discussed two centuries ago. We looked again at Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell - the precious treasures that speak the passion of the American Revolution. This is where it happened. Ordinary people lived here, talked about it, discussed it, argued heatedly about it, and then made solemn vows to die for the idea if need be. And I remembered something Bruce Catton had written for American Heritage on the occasion of the Bicentennial. "They wanted no more King George, of

course, but they also wanted the kind of freedom that came into the front yard and the parlour and the kitchen of the ordinary human being. Men and women did not propose to be bossed around any longer, and at the same time they did not propose to go hungry or live in want or feel the restraints of a tightly ordered society whose classes and customs were beyond change. They saw liberty, not as a glorious abstraction, but as something that began with what the citizen had for breakfast and went on to effect all of the homely concerns of everyday life. " (A.H. 6/74 p.4).

"Not a glorious abstraction...but something that began with what the citizen had for breakfast." The freedom debated and argued along those narrow cobble stone streets was not an idea - but a dynamic process that lives in the sinews of the culture. Mrs. Adair's parade is the evidence. What was born 201 years ago is still happening in our culture. Historian Sydney Mead called it "The Lively Experiment".

God, we presume to believe, is interested in it. Now, every culture that ever existed has manufactured a theology to undergird its political and military aspirations. The deities of Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Greece and Rome all approved and blessed the comings and goings of their particular people. Adolf Hitler invoked the cultural and religious traditions of the Germanic people as he sent the Panzers across the border into the low countries. Lincoln mused about the irony of God's will being claimed so confidently by partisans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. I do not presume that the God of the Bible is owned by, or the patron of, the American Republic. I would, however, submit that God is very much interested in the matter of human freedom, and in that the subject is at least alive in our midst. He does keep an attentive eye on us and our affairs.

The subject of human freedom is the dominant motif in current religious thought. The most recent trend in religious scholarship is called "Liberation Theology". Its premise is that God is a liberator; that His relationships with humanity from the beginning of time may be understood in terms of a process of liberation. God is the agitator for freedom - and the eternal enemy of oppression. Proponents of the new Liberation Theology point to the processes of history which constitute the bulk of the Old Testament. Our lesson this morning, for instance, is the foundation. God is creator - but He is also deliverer-liberator. In fact, the most ancient traditions pay far less attention to His role as creator than the matter of liberation. In Exodus 3 God hears the cries of His people who are in bondage - not free - and begins to do something about it. The basic Biblical tradition that is to say, holds up the idea of God's people being led by Him from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberation.

In our New Testament Lesson the context is radically different, but the issue is the same. St. Paul was writing to new, Gentile Christians who were slipping into a legalistic, rigid pattern of religion. Instead of a new freedom in Christ they were beginning to look like religious people always look; their faith had been reduced to obeying a set of rules. "For freedom Christ has set us free," Paul wrote. "Don't slip back into subtle slavery of any kind." God, in both Old and New Testaments is very interested in the matter of freedom. His will is that people be free of whatever restricts, confines and oppresses them - even if it turns out to be their own religion.

The Bible is terribly realistic about the whole matter, however. The real threats to human freedom are not always external: rather they spring from other, conflicting human needs. In the saga of the Exodus, for instance, the children of Israel leave Egypt in a hurry with the army of Pharaoh in hot pursuit. Ahead of them they see the Red Sea and on the other side of it the barren wastes of Sinai. Behind them they see the soldiers. And they say to Moses: "What have you done to us? It would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Exodus 14:11-12). The basic human need for security is often, if not always, in conflict with the call to freedom. Egypt didn't seem so bad after all. At least there was enough to eat and a place to sleep and safety.

Centuries later in Galatia the new Christians found themselves in a similar set of circumstances. Suddenly told that they were free to make moral decisions on the basis of God's love in Jesus Christ, they became anxious: the old religious law wasn't so bad. At least it told a person how to live: it provided a minimum of risk and a maximum of religious security. Paul's genius is in his recognition of the frailty of freedom and the eternal temptation to give it up in the name of security.

The issue is always before us. Theologically, there is immense appeal in a religion which provides simple answers to all of life's questions and eliminates the need for the freedom to think for oneself. Ethically, there is immense appeal to religion that knows what is right and wrong in every situation and eliminates the need for freedom to wrestle with the issues personally. The security of certainty looks very, very good to people who are assaulted by tough moral questions. We seem, at times too anxious to lay freedom aside, too ready to restrict freedom of expression, for instance, because of what we regard as a threat to public morality.

The Bible knows another and more potent enemy of freedom, however. St. Paul put it this way: "You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." Freedom and selfishness - or what the New Testament calls sin - is always a fatal combination. Freedom, that is to say, is not the right to do whatever one pleases. In fact, it is a gross distortion of freedom when the actions of one are hurtful to others.

We have trouble working with the subtlety of that. Young people in the sixties, for instance, dropped out of our culture in droves, to "do their own thing" in the name of freedom. But if your concern is to "do your own thing" you really aren't free - just selfish. As a matter of fact you may have slipped into a more demonic kind of slavery - the slavery to self.

Freedom demands discipline; self-control, St. Paul called it. The two are complimentary and interdependent, not contradictory. Trueblood points out that the musician who displays a tight pattern of practice will be free to play J.S.Bach. The would-be musician who, in the name of freedom, elects not to practice, is not free to play the music and is confined by his or her own laziness. Skiing is almost lyrically described as an experience of freedom - rushing down a clean slope with the fresh, cold air, alone, free. I know enough about it to understand that it is also an experience of immense, disciplined self-control: and that a beginner will feel anything but free on a good slope.

The final enemy of freedom is unfettered selfishness. And it's interesting how clearly the founders of the nation understood the political implications of that Biblical insight. When selfishness becomes corporate; when individual egotism is multiplied in the body politic, freedom is gravely threatened. Josiah Quincy wrote, "It is much easier to restrain liberty from running into licentiousness, than power from swelling into tyranny." (Paul Minear, I Pledge Allegiance, p.46). John Adams, with great historic vision, wrote to Jefferson that "Power always thinks it has a great soul...and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws. Our passions, ambitions, avarice, love and resentment possess so much metaphysical subtlety and so much overpowering eloquence that they insinuate themselves into the understanding and the conscience and convert both to their path." (Theology Today, 7/76, p.141).

And Michael Novak, writing in A.D. Magazine several years ago observed that the secret wisdom of the Founding Fathers was that they didn't trust anyone. That is to say, they had a realistic idea of the human condition, a healthy sense of sin and the knowledge that the last, greatest foe of freedom is simple human selfishness.

St. Paul, in the same sentence in which he issued his eloquent call to freedom, said - "through love be servants of one another." Love, apparently, is the price of liberty. Freedom is best protected when it prompts compassion and caring. Liberty is preserved when it is extended to others. We are never bigger, better, more happy or more free than when we give ourselves in humble service to the welfare of someone else.

The New Testament defines freedom as the act of commitment to Jesus Christ and the voluntary assumption of His Lordship. It sets out the context of human freedom as the love of God. Charles Peguy wrote a poem entitled Freedom that expresses it eloquently:

"When you have once known what it is to be loved freely
submission no longer has any taste.
All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright
attitude of a free man as he kneels.
All the submissions, all the dejection in the world
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation
From a love that is free." (God Speaks)

Behind the American Revolution is the notion that people should be free: that God created people to be free: He wants them free, works with them to be free: that people are far, far less than He created them to be when they are not free. Sydney Mead called the institutionalizing of that profoundly Biblical idea "The Lively Experiment". The inference is that the revolution continues, the experiment is still happening, and that people in every age must be reminded anew that freedom is precious and fragile and vulnerable.

It is not well with freedom throughout the world. In times of political turmoil and economic uncertainty, country after country elects to reduce the perimeters of freedom in the name of security. President Carter with his relentless concern with human rights stabs our conscience by reminding us that we do forget easily - in the name of expedience and pragmatism.

I didn't realize, until someone pointed it out to me, that the essence of our National Anthem is a question: - "...Does that star-spangled banner yet wave - o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

May I suggest that it is a good question to ask in each generation: that the question of freedom is ever before us - that the most appropriate celebration of the 201st anniversary of our Independence will be one which includes it and answers it in reverent commitment?

"For Freedom Christ has set us free."

Amen.

Father, we give thanks for our freedom: for the people and institutions that protect it: for those who have died defending it. Grant us, in our day, new courage to live freely as Your people: to find our freedom in obeying Your will: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.